



## **The Institute on Religion and Public Policy**

### **Religious Freedom in Ethiopia**

#### **Executive Summary**

Ethiopia generally enjoys religious freedom both in letter and in practice. The government upholds and enforces the constitutional right to practice one's chosen faith. Additionally, the government protects members of all faiths from religious persecution and discrimination. The constitution sets out clear guidelines for the relationship between religion and the state, under which the two are to be separate and independent of one another's decisions. Still, there are credible reports of religiously motivated violence against minority religious groups; however, these incidents seem to be isolated, and the national and local government dealt with these cases sternly and judiciously. Ethiopia and the United States have an open dialogue on religious freedom.

#### **The Institute on Religion and Public Policy**

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

#### **Legal Framework**

Ethiopians' right to religious freedom is articulated in multiple sections of the constitution. Also, the government has done a good job of upholding and enforcing these constitutional standards. In so doing, they have set standards under which religion and government can operate separately while respecting the other entity.

Article 27 of Ethiopia's constitution outlines the country's commitment to ensuring religious freedom. The article's first section states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion." Additionally, this section outlines the freedom to worship, in public or private, without persecution. By outlining and making clear these rights, Ethiopia's constitution commits the country to the free practice of religion.

In addition to the right to practice whatever religion one desires, Ethiopians are constitutionally protected from discrimination based on religion. Article 25 calls for the right to equality. By stating that freedom of religion goes beyond simply the right to practice, but also the freedom from discrimination or persecution, the constitution makes religious inequality illegal. This article is important in that it creates a standard under which religious freedom and equality can be maintained.

All religions must register with the Ethiopian government. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, representing the two largest religious groups in the country, have not adhered to this rule and have faced no serious punishment. The EOC never registered, while the EIASC failed to re-register after its initial registration. Sunni Islam and the Orthodox Church each make up about 45% of the population.

Ethiopia has a strict policy of separation of church and state. Article 11 of the constitution defines this relationship. No religion is to involve itself in the government's affairs and the government is not to involve itself in any religion's affairs. Also, this article says that Ethiopia is a secular state, and that there is no state religion. In accordance, religious political parties are banned. This measure ensures that no such party might come to power and override the secular aspect of the constitution. By demarking the barrier between church and state, Ethiopia has structured state and civil entities in a way that protects religious freedom while ensuring the secular nature of the government.

All religious education in schools is outlawed. Religion may be taught in Sunday Schools and Mosques. However, no such teaching may occur in a school, not even at schools founded by religious groups, which are allowed.

### **Reports of Religious Discrimination and Violence**

In general, the right to religious freedom has been upheld in Ethiopia. However, there have been problems with the registration process that have undermined this right. As mentioned previously, the EOC was not punished for its refusal to register with the government. Other indigenous groups are required to re-register with the government every three years. These smaller religious groups complain that this policy shows a lack of equality among religious groups.

Another issue of contention among religious groups is the allocation of land from the government for religious use. Many smaller groups complain that the government provides an unfair portion of its land to the EOC. Additionally, the EIASC has received preferential treatment in land allotment, though they have complained about the government's favoritism towards the EOC.

In addition to these governmental issues, there have been isolated incidents of religious violence. All these acts were perpetrated by citizens, and not by the

government. Muslim attackers destroyed 12 homes on October 16, 2007. The trial is ongoing and no decision has been made regarding the perpetrators yet.

The most severe attack occurred February 8, 2008, when Muslims in the Oromiya region used machetes to attack members of two protestant churches. In all, 16 were wounded, along with one who was killed. However, the local authorities dealt with this incident efficiently and judiciously. Four men were arrested for their involvement, with the court handing three of them life sentences in prison and the other a four year sentence in prison. Also, on June 23 of that same year, Muslim and Christian leaders met at the site of the attacks to promote religious understanding and denounce such divisive violence. This punishment for the attackers and the meeting of religious leaders signal that both the Ethiopian government and religious leaders are committed to the freedom of religion and freedom from religious discrimination.

There are no reported cases of forced religious conversion nor is there suspicion of such actions taking place.

### **U.S. Foreign Policy**

The U.S. and Ethiopia enjoy relatively good relations dating back to 1903. The two countries have signed a handful of mutual defense agreements, and the U.S. has provided Ethiopia with both military and economic assistance. Furthermore, the U.S. Peace Corps program was designed specifically to benefit Ethiopia. Today, Ethiopia is a strategic partner of the United States in the Global War on Terrorism. U.S. development assistance to Ethiopia is focused on reducing famine vulnerability, hunger, and poverty and emphasizes economic, governance, and social sector policy reforms.

### **Conclusion**

The overall religious situation in Ethiopia remains overwhelmingly positive. The legal structure of the constitution affords the citizens the basic rights and tenets of religious freedom and checks the government's ability to abuse or deny that right. There have been reports of incidents that violate this right. However, with regard to religious violence, the local and federal authorities' response to such cases reflects a firm commitment to upholding religious freedom.